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Cultural Policy and Ethics of Care:

An Exploration of Experiences of Cultural
Entrepreneurs in Western Canada

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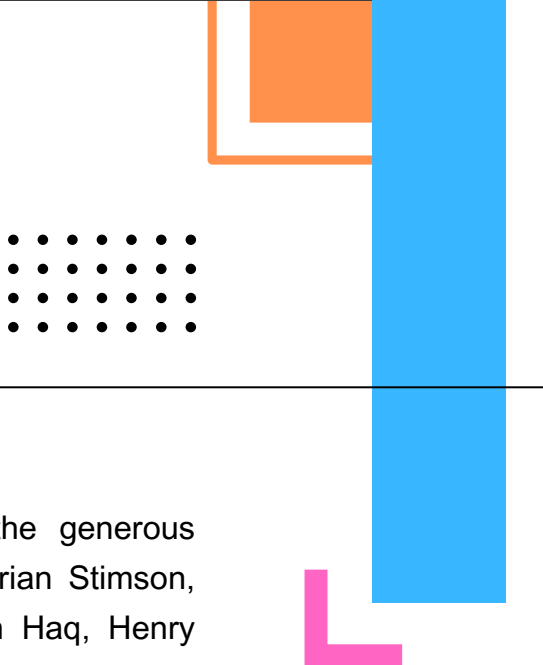
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents an overview of findings from a study titled “Equity in Cultural Policy” conducted by Deniz Ünsal of Royal Roads University and Taiwo Afolabi at the Centre of Socially Engaged Theatre (C-SET), University of Regina. The research team consisted of Yvette Nolan, Luba Kozak, and Fonon Nunghe. This Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)-funded research examined the first-hand perspectives, experiences and viewpoints of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC)[1] self-employed artists in Canada on Canadian cultural policy and institutional structures and processes in light of their contributions to social good and community-building through artistic practice.

[1] We acknowledge that words and their orders matter. While both Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour (IBPoC) and Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) are used interchangeably, we will respectfully use BIPOC for the sake of consistency, as it follows alphabetical order and is more commonly used in literature.

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Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge our responsibility as researchers working on Indigenous lands and commit to ongoing learning, reflection, and ethical engagement with Indigenous peoples and all equity-owed communities.

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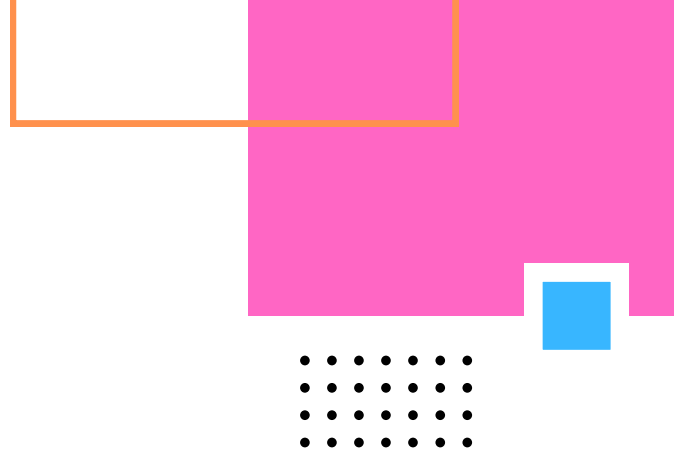
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You can also visit our Research website: <https://equitycp.ca>

Section One: Introduction

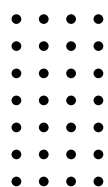


1.1 Context

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the entrenched socio-economic and political divides pervading contemporary societies. While all sectors grappled with the pandemic's multifaceted ramifications, including economic downturns, health crises, closures, and labor market interruptions, the art sector bore a disproportionately heavy toll. Given its reliance on live, interactive, public modes of expression, it was uniquely vulnerable to the pandemic's disruptions. Within this sphere, Indigenous and racialized communities suffered a disproportionately severe impact. Concurrently, several social justice disruptions, some with entrenched history, received massive public response, such as the murder of George Floyd, the widespread mobilization of the Black Lives Matter movement, the surge in anti-Asian hate crimes, Every Child Matters rallies and the discussion around ongoing colonization in Canada after the discovery of unmarked graves of Indigenous children on the ground of old residential schools. These events served to underscore the deep-seated racism, discrimination, and socio-political injustices prevalent within our societies (Supernant, 2022; Ince & Dunivin, 2022; Zhao, O'Connor, Lenz & Fang 2022) and revealed the systemic vulnerabilities inherent within prevailing social and political frameworks. Often response to these injustices is voiced by the creative talents and artists from the impacted communities.

Their socially engaged arts practices accentuate the pressing imperative for the implementation of equitable frameworks within society as well as the arts and cultural domain. Calls for social justice and diversity from underrepresented arts communities have created an urgent need to consider ways the Canadian cultural policy landscape can become more diverse and inclusive (Canada Council for the Arts, 2021).

This research, conducted between 2022 and 2024, captures a critical moment in time when the art and culture sector was navigating the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and responding to the powerful wave of social justice movements that emerged in its wake. The findings and reflections presented are deeply informed by the social, political, and cultural dynamics of that specific period, marked by both unprecedented challenges and renewed calls for equity and transformation. While the context has since evolved, with shifting priorities and new developments in the art and broader society, the issues raised, such as systemic inequities, underrepresentation, need for support for BIPOC arts leadership and the need for inclusive cultural policy, remain deeply relevant. In the United States, the results of the 2024 presidential election and subsequent policy shifts have significantly disrupted diversity, equity, and



inclusion (DEI) efforts across multiple sectors, including the arts in that country. These developments have sparked global concern, as similar political shifts and rising populist movements in other countries have begun to echo these regressive stances, challenging the momentum of equity-focused work worldwide. Canadian arts organizations, particularly those advocating for

underrepresented voices, face increased scrutiny and pressure to justify equity-based initiatives amid a more polarized public discourse (Chong, 2025; Bell, 2025). This shifting landscape underscores the fragility of progress in the arts and highlights the urgent need to safeguard inclusive policies that reflect the diverse realities of Canadian society and uphold commitments made in response to the cultural and social reckonings of the early 2020s.

The urgency and resonance of the voices that emerged during the time this research was conducted continue to inform ongoing conversations about social justice, decolonization, representation, and structural transformation within the arts sector.

1.2 Aim

The aim of this project is to document and understand the strategies of self-employed BIPOC cultural entrepreneurs from Western Canada (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba) who serve an important role in their communities and beyond by creating social value while leveraging their creative talents as well as collaborative and leadership skills to address discrimination and bring social change that fosters a sense of identity and belonging.

The project amplifies the experiences of BIPOC self-employed artists and creates the opportunity to better understand the strategies they employ to produce social good through art and gain valuable insights that will inform Canadian cultural policy that emphasizes equity, diversity, and inclusion. Our aim in this research was to explore the question:



In what ways might the social value creation strategies of self-employed BIPOC artists who employ socially engaged arts practices contribute to the making of an equitable Canadian cultural policy?

In Canada, there is a gap in cultural policy research and its intersection with social justice, a gap that the work of artists, art leaders and cultural entrepreneurs from underrepresented groups, along with an exploration of the social value of the arts, can illuminate. This research fills this gap by investigating and documenting the lived experiences and insights of BIPOC artists and benefits diverse audiences, ranging from scholars and policy makers to other community leaders and artists by contributing to ongoing dialogue on cultural policy and social change in Canada.

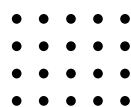
We engage in respectful dialogues with BIPOC cultural entrepreneurs, leaving our presumptions at the door. With open ears and hearts, guided by the principles of ethics of care theory that prioritize the needs of others, our research greatly benefits from their unique perspectives. These perspective provide useful feedback and constructive amendments to current cultural policies. We engage BIPOC artists in conversation on topics like funding, support, and community good and/or service to garner a deeper understanding of how Canadian cultural policy serves them and their respective communities.

1.3 Approach and Method

This project is rooted in a place-based approach in which we are attentive to the dynamic connections people hold to the land and regions under study. Placing importance on the action of introducing ourselves is more than a formality, it is a proactive, strategic and ethical move in our effort to be transparent by acknowledging our positionalities and identifying our limitations as researchers. Through online interviews and group workshops, our project fosters a cooperative knowledge production model that positions participants as stakeholders in its outcome. We are not just exploring obstacles and coping mechanisms employed by BIPOC cultural entrepreneurs, but collectively addressing policy issues to envision future-oriented strategies. Together with BIPOC artists, we are redefining the term “cultural entrepreneur” to move beyond its capitalist connotation towards a more holistic and ethical approach that repositions social good and well-being at the centre.

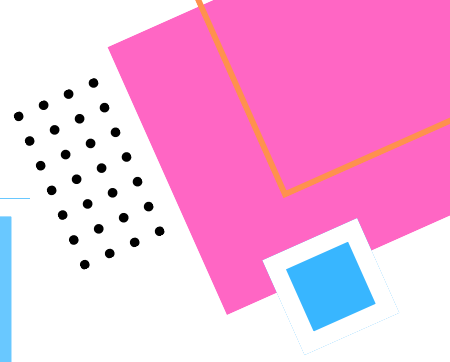
During the pandemic, the concepts of “community” and “care” were the most frequently cited and the most vulnerable ones. Our research focuses on these terms and explores the strategies of self-employed independent Indigenous and racialized artists. Social distancing measures brought limitations on collective gatherings, leading to isolation for many individuals. Traditional communal gatherings and cultural practices that are integral to Indigenous social cohesion and spiritual well-being were restricted (during the COVID). The pandemic also highlighted disparities in healthcare access and infrastructure, disproportionately affecting Indigenous, Black and racialized populations. Our research centers on the concepts of care and community, exploring their roles in the artistic processes of Indigenous, Black, and racialized artists.

We were guided by ethics of care, “a relational and context-bound approach toward morality and decision making” (Burton et al., 2013) and community-based participatory research framework. Our premise for creating knowledge was based on Participatory Action Research (PAR), where we as researchers collaborate with participants to understand the situation. This approach allowed us to define and describe the social value of the arts and its role in building communities in the experiences of artists. A change in thinking is needed on the moral economy of the subsidized arts sector (Belfiore 2022) to better support artists and their communities. As Eleonora Belfiore (2022) writes,





“Looking at the mechanisms for the funding of socially engaged arts practice targeted at disadvantaged communities through an ethics of care lens, thus, means asking to what extent the funding bodies are really ‘attending to and meeting the needs’ of the project participants for whom they claim to be taking responsibility. Are they in fact simply passing on the burden of the actual practice?” (74).



Embracing the unique perspectives of BIPOC artists in Canada, particularly in the transformative post-COVID era, can inspire new approaches and ideas.

1.4 Selection of Artists

We used a snowball method to identify and reach out to artists. We interviewed 18 Indigenous, Black and racialized independent, self-employed artists from the four provinces of Western Canada (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba) from the visual and performing arts. These were emerging and established artists living and working in urban and rural areas. We prioritized artists who are located and practice in Western Canada due to our objective of amplifying perspectives from this region, which is often underrepresented. These participants were also identified as having first-hand experience with navigating Canadian cultural policy and some working in more advanced leadership roles. They offered practical expertise and valuable insights that aligned with the broader goals of the project.

Based on insights gained during the individual interview sessions, certain individuals were invited to participate in the group workshops. Group participants had a chance to share additional thoughts and expand on the key themes from our initial conversations with them and were invited to engage in a collaborative exchange of ideas among each other.

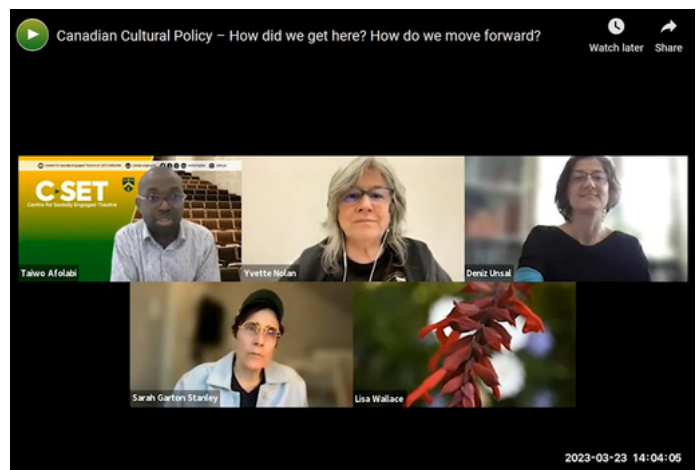
1.5 First Stage of Research

We completed the initial stage of the project, by conducting a thorough review of existing literature on cultural entrepreneurship, art and cultural policy development in Canada, including cultural policy documents. During the Winter and Spring of 2023, we held individual conversations with independent artists from Indigenous and racialized communities to better understand their perspectives on and experiences with the art and cultural ecosystem in Canada. The excerpts from these interviews were meticulously synthesized using the Dedoose analytical software. This software enabled the research team to codify data thematically and organize ideas.

1.6 Second Stage of Research

Two podcasts were produced in the context of the project that summarized what was learned from our conversations with artists. The first episode explored whether artists identify with the literature definition of cultural entrepreneurs and if their perspectives, experience, and values within their community-based art practices capture those definitions. While the term “cultural entrepreneur” elicited mixed responses, artists referred to strategies that created opportunities, fostered social value and were passionate about driving change. Artists resonated more with alternative terms like facilitators, mentors, changemakers, and community builders, reflecting artists’ resilience and their strong commitment to their communities. The second episode highlighted the artist’s role in promoting social good. Artists focused on creating safe, critical spaces, engaging in meaningful conversations, and providing resources like mentorships to support and empower community members.

In Winter 2024, we met with three groups of artists to reflect on changes in cultural policy, institutional practices and general approaches to working with equity-owed groups. Together with the artists, we defined concepts such as “cultural entrepreneurship” and “social value of the arts” and a cultural policy and praxis that centers on the value of the arts on “community”.

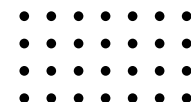


Taiwo Afolabi and Deniz Ünsal moderating a panel discussion on Massey Report between Yvette Nolan and Sarah Ganton Stanley

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These group sessions offered artists an opportunity to connect and share ideas, which was part of the collaborative processes that contributed to defining problems, taking action, and creating opportunities for knowledge creation and exchange. After evaluating the data from these

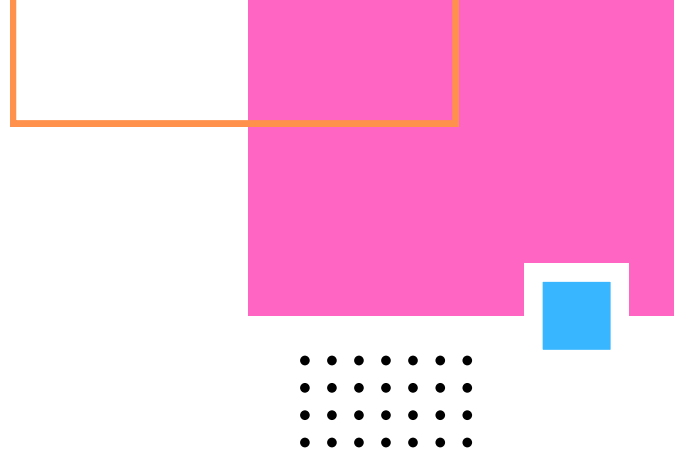
group workshops, the findings were organized into this report with the intention to present the lessons learned to the participants and solicit their feedback, thereby ensuring the accuracy of our understanding.



Section Two:

Analysis Core

Themes



The report is divided into three themes based on questions that were asked in individual and group sessions to independent self-employed BIPOC artists:

Theme 1: Cultural Entrepreneurship

Theme 2: Social Value of the Arts

Theme 3: Cultural Policy Change

Below, each theme is presented separately, focusing on the points raised in individual conversations about it and then three group sessions addressing a specific question around that theme.

At the end of each theme, there are further relevant questions raised for researchers, policymakers, arts organizations, and artists to invite them for further reflection and action.

Each theme also offers an “Insight Scoop” to highlight an insight that goes beyond the main conversation but adds valuable depth or a new dimension to the theme.

2.1 Theme One: On Cultural Entrepreneurship and Arts Leadership

Introduction

When we embarked on this research project, we wanted to investigate whether terminology used in the study and research of arts management came close to or was able to represent the nature and scope of the work of Indigenous, Black and racialized self-employed independent artists and cultural makers within their communities. In general, terminology sets the framework for understanding an idea. In our context, it was to understand the processes and role of actors that engage in value creation within the arts. Specifically, our aim was to learn if Indigenous, Black and racialized artists consider themselves as “cultural entrepreneurs,” an existing term in the study of the arts sector/management. Moreover, we were interested in how artists identified themselves and what this identity/role meant to them in their practice.

In the literature on creative economy, cultural entrepreneurs (sometimes also called creative or arts entrepreneurs) are often defined as independent (that is, self-employed) creative talents who “seek to support their creativity and autonomy, advance their capacity for adaptability, and create artistic as well as economic and social value” (Chang & Wyszomirski, 2015, p. 24). Entrepreneurship in arts and culture is “an economic as well as sociocultural activity, based on innovation, exploitation of opportunities and risk-taking behaviour. It is a visionary, strategic, innovative and social activity” (Varbanova 2013). For this reason, cultural entrepreneurs are sometimes also called “social entrepreneurs”.

Our interviews with 18 Indigenous, Black and racialized independent self-employed artists in Western Canada from the visual and performing arts fields show that the term 'cultural entrepreneur' is not widely known and is not a concept/role that artists immediately identify with. Some artist, however, relate with the term and explain how their approach and work could be described fully or partially as cultural entrepreneurship. They also offer their own interpretation of and expand on the meaning of the term. They refer to specific abilities and actions such as:

- Being independent and having freedom and agency to make decisions, which allows them to focus on social issues, initiate and make changes such as questioning systems through artistic creation.
- Facilitating, creating opportunities for self and others; serving and supporting others through artistic projects; creating and using one's own powers to empower others; and demonstrating leadership.
- Creating new works and forging new projects.
- Engaging in the business aspects of arts creation, selling, marketing and promoting the artwork/project; generating different streams of income; and using the funds to offer opportunities for the communities they work with.

On the other hand, some artists chose to distance themselves from the term because they do not see cultural entrepreneurship as a term that represents what they are doing. The word “entrepreneur” specifically evokes a capitalist mindset (product-driven), aligning with market-related forces that are profit-oriented and focused on business (profit-driven). Additionally, they perceive it as a term that relates to product/outcome-centered, market-oriented activities, and economic value creation (transactional aesthetics). Cultural entrepreneurship is therefore seen as a capitalist endeavor, something that is disconnected from the arts and relates more to the field of business and marketing. Instead, artists prefer words such as arts leaders, community leaders, craftsmanship, and “movers and shakers”.

These different views on cultural entrepreneurship, its content, aims and relations prompted a deeper reflection on how BIPOC artists envision their leadership, raising the critical question: What does BIPOC art leadership mean in the future? We discussed this question in a workshop with a group of artists. Below can be found the points and suggestions raised during the workshop.

“What does BIPOC arts leadership mean in the future?”

1. Redefining Arts Leadership: From Position to Practice
2. Navigating Polarization: Leadership in a Time of Uncertainty
3. Building Supportive Ecosystems: Education, Archives, and Leadership Continuity

Question Addressed: What does BIPOC arts leadership mean in the future?

As we look toward the future of BIPOC leadership in the arts, we must address the systems that shape who gets to lead, how leadership is taught, and how it is sustained. This moment calls for a shift in how we define leadership, how we support leaders navigating polarization and burnout, and how we build educational and professional infrastructures so future leaders can thrive without starting from scratch. Grounded in values of care, mentorship, and accountability, this conversation centers around redefining leadership, navigating today’s complexities, and building sustainable pathways for generations to come. Below is a summary of insights, experiences and suggestions shared in group sessions.

1. Redefining Arts Leadership: From Position to Practice

The future of BIPOC arts leadership hinges on shifting how we redefine and develop leadership, moving beyond titles to values, care, and collective learning. Leadership must not be confined to executive roles, but seen as a practice rooted in service, values, and relational accountability. Leadership emerges through community care, creativity, and thoughtful engagement, not just administrative strategy. Some artists in leadership positions feel they must accommodate the institutional expectations and are forced to adapt to inflexible systems. As a result, BIPOC cultural leaders are denied a space to be vulnerable and take strategic risks to foster meaningful change. The current period is a time of uncertainty and upheaval, which presents an ideal opportunity to challenge norms and push for systemic transformation. Institutions must strive to find a balance between acknowledging the interconnected needs of artists and their communities. This requires creating a space for mistakes, learning and embracing the discomfort that comes from “friction

points,” (as was called by one of the artists) which are essential to fostering growth and finding community-based solutions. We understand the term “friction points” to mean a juncture where different opinions and perspectives meet, which can lead to change, although this may require compromise and working through differing views and approaches.

The expectations placed on BIPOC leaders, particularly women, are often disproportionate, with failures seen as communal rather than individual. Leadership must instead promote collective resilience and support systems of mentorship, succession, and co-creation. At the same time, there’s a call to move away from the entrenched model of leadership as rooted in “artistic genius,” a framework that tends to concentrate power in a single individual and can undermine collaborative, sustainable models of governance. We need leadership values rooted in kindness, care, professionalism, respect, and joy, as seen in Indigenous traditions. True leadership should be defined by how we support others, not just the structures we manage.

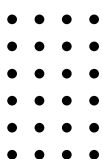
Artists bring a wealth of skills, lived experience, and insight that often go unrecognized in leadership spaces. We must begin teaching leadership and arts administration at the high school or postsecondary level, so future leaders

recognize that their creative skillset are professionally valuable across sectors. Cross-disciplinary mentorship can deepen this understanding by bringing multiple perspectives to shared problems and redefining who counts as a mentor—anyone with experience and the will to guide has value to contribute to the collective process of leading. Leadership in the arts is a collective process and is not something done and practised by one person at the top of the organization individually.

2. Navigating Polarization: Leadership in a Time of Uncertainty

BIPOC leadership in the arts is emerging at a time of deep cultural polarization, where collective action feels increasingly difficult and divisiveness is amplified, both within and beyond the arts. The post-COVID landscape has shifted dramatically: some emerging artists have lost visibility, while those who remain are often burdened by over-consultation and burnout. This leaves leaders navigating fractured communities while trying to hold space for dialogue, safety, and trust.

The current (2024) climate demands critical thinking: Who are we aligning with? Are our actions truly rooted in allyship or are just reactionary? Social media often intensifies conflict and shaming, making it harder to use our voices wisely. Artists can find themselves punished for speaking out, becoming adversaries within their own organizations. There is a need for care-based leadership that doesn’t replicate the very systems it seeks to change.





BIPOC communities are not monolithic - there is no singular roadmap forward. But fostering conversations that hold discomfort with compassion, humor, and clarity is essential. Leadership today must allow room for multiple truths and emotional honesty, particularly when the system still rewards conformity over care. We need to train future leaders to navigate this tension, not just with strategy, but with humility and emotional intelligence.

3. Building Supportive Ecosystems: Education, Archives, and Leadership Continuity

For BIPOC leadership to thrive in the future, we must build intentional systems of support, educationally, professionally, and historically, so that new generations do not have to reinvent the wheel. Leadership development cannot rely on isolated experiences or personal resilience alone. What's needed is a robust, accessible foundation of knowledge, critical writing, and historical precedent that future BIPOC leaders can learn from, adapt, and expand.

Too often, BIPOC leaders enter roles without access to the accumulated wisdom of those before them. This disconnect creates unnecessary struggle and stagnates progress. A culture of archiving, of documenting strategies, challenges, and moments of transformation, is essential. There are already rich resources from the 1990s and 2000s, but they remain underutilized. We need to bring these out, update them, and build new materials in real time, through writing, convening, and mentorship.

Critical writing on BIPOC leadership in the arts is essential for self-reflection, growth, and legacy-building. It helps articulate challenges, clarify values, and document strategies for future leaders. Critical writing plays a vital role in unpacking these complexities, helping future leaders understand not just the what, but the why and how of leadership. Yet, this work is risky, it can expose internal tensions and provoke backlash within and beyond the community. Still, without it, meaningful progress and structural change remain out of reach.

New and existing programs such as the Art Leadership Training Program (ALTP) co-created by Taiwo Afolabi and the Belfry Theatre (currently co-coordinated by Persephone Theatre, Belfry Theatre and the Centre for Socially Engaged Theatre at the University of Regina), Banff Centre for Art and Creativity's Cultural Leadership Program, Why Not Theatre's ThisGen Fellowship Program and the National Theatre School's Artistic Leadership Residency program among others continue to build capacity for a sustained and well-equipped leaders with the art and culture sector in the country.

Conclusion

Reimagining (BIPOC) arts leadership requires us to shift from rigid, hierarchical notions of power toward leadership as a collective, relational, and care-based practice. This process of reflection is about creating a sustainable leadership pipeline. Developing curricula, mentorship networks, and knowledge pathways for arts administration and leadership within BIPOC contexts ensures that those stepping into leadership roles do so with context, community, and confidence. By embedding this knowledge into leadership education, we offer future BIPOC leaders tools to navigate the sector with less isolation and more clarity.

This is how we shift from survival to strategy, from improvisation to long-term vision.

The future of BIPOC arts leadership also requires moving beyond mere representation, recognizing that the presence of racialized individuals in leadership roles does not inherently dismantle systemic barriers or lead to transformative change. Rather than relying on individual figures to carry the burden of change, leadership must be collective, rooted in compassion, integrity, and a commitment to balancing the diverse needs of communities. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for more horizontal, accessible support networks that empower emerging leaders and reduce the isolation often felt by those in BIPOC leadership positions. Environments that allow for mistakes, learning, and growth are crucial to sustaining leadership and fostering long-term change. Ultimately, reducing structural barriers and creating more equitable pathways into leadership is essential for cultivating the next generation of BIPOC leaders in the arts.

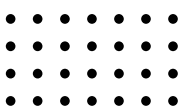
Further Research Questions:

1. How do we train BIPOC leaders so that they are ready for this moment in time where our societies, cultures and political views are deeply polarised, to address the issues and promote the arts process, community engagement, care, etc?
2. What are those values that we need to start thinking about the work that needs to be done as BIPOC arts leaders?



Insight Scoop: Mentorship

The conversations revealed a collective understanding of mentorship as a deeply relational, reciprocal, and values-driven process. Participants framed mentorship not as a hierarchical or prescriptive exchange but as a living, evolving practice where experience and wisdom are passed along through modeling, encouragement, and shared growth. Some emphasized leading by example, demonstrating values like conflict resolution, respect, and care in action. They stressed the importance of treating mentees as collaborators rather than subordinates, honoring the space and relationship with mutual respect. Mentorship, in this sense, is





“sacred,” rooted in authentic presence and the willingness to invite others into the process without ego or pretense.

Other participants expanded this by highlighting the transformational power of community-based mentorship, especially in creative and teaching spaces. They underscored the necessity of dismantling outdated industry models and offering mentees the freedom to imagine new paths. The real value lies in empowering young people with confidence, honesty, and a sense of belonging. There is a generational shift in power and mentorship can be seen as an act of passing the torch, creating space for younger voices to lead, connect, and innovate. Some artists, by framing themselves as a guide rather than a gatekeeper, reinforced mentorship as an act of humility and service that prioritizes encouragement over prescription.

One artist added a deeply personal and cultural lens, identifying with the role of “Tita”—an auntie figure who mentors with radical love, humor, and accountability. She emphasized the importance of listening first, discerning how best to serve based on the needs of younger artists, and modeling support through meaningful action. Her approach blends emotional honesty with tangible care, affirming that mentorship isn’t about perfection or authority, but about being present, responsive, and real. Her reflections, creating opportunities rather than hoarding them, speak to a larger cultural shift toward generosity, community-building, and the responsibility to uplift others while acknowledging that learning flows both ways.

2.2 Theme 2: Social Value of the Arts, Values-Based Arts Practice and Governance

Introduction

The second set of questions we asked artists from BIPOC communities aimed at understanding the artists’ approach to community-based arts practice and their experiences with the values, relations, processes, practices, resources of mainstream arts organizations.

- “Community” is defined as those experiencing otherness—primarily Indigenous, Black, and racialized groups, but also based on gender and ability. In this research, “community” refers not only to racialized groups but also to

individuals who experience marginalization due to gender identity, disability, or social exclusion. Artists recognize shared experiences of otherness as the foundation for community connection and solidarity.

- Artists emphasize relationality, respect, and reciprocity, especially in community work. Many artists highlight these values as core to how they engage with others. They view art-making as a relational process, grounded in mutual respect and giving back to the people and communities they work with.

- Indigenous approaches emphasize relational accountability and deep listening. Several artists, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, referenced Indigenous practices of working through relationships. These approaches prioritize listening closely, understanding needs, and nurturing trust, shaping art practices as extensions of community care and connection.
- Mainstream arts organizations often lack cultural competency and understanding of the practical implications of these values. Artists frequently encounter arts institutions that do not understand or prioritize community values like reciprocity or relational work. This lack of cultural awareness creates barriers to authentic, inclusive collaboration, often leading to misalignment in priorities.
- BIPOC artists often bridge gaps without adequate support, leading to selective partnerships or forming their own companies. Many BIPOC artists find themselves filling institutional gaps, handling community care and structural issues alongside artistic direction. Because this labor is often unsupported, they seek trusted partners or create their own culturally aligned spaces and organizations.
- Systemic structures (funding, schedules) rarely align with community-based practices. Funding models and grant systems are typically rigid, with timelines and evaluation criteria that do not always accommodate community-driven processes. Artists must constantly adapt or work around these systems to meet the needs of their communities.

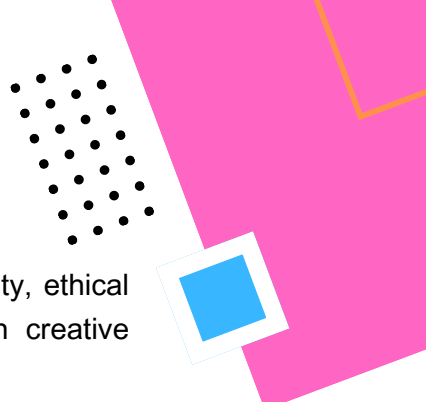
- Artists act as mentors, advocates, and change-makers. Beyond creating art, BIPOC artists take on many roles, supporting community voices, mentoring others, and advocating for social change. Their practice is deeply tied to challenging systemic injustice and valuing underrepresented cultural expressions.
- Community work is seen as duty, alongside paid gig work. For many artists, paid gigs are necessary for survival, while community work is a meaningful responsibility. Despite being unpaid or underfunded, this work is seen as essential and rooted in care, purpose, and cultural obligation.

These insights invite a deeper examination of how values like relational accountability, respect, and reciprocity can inform efforts toward decolonization within mainstream arts organizations, and what it means to embed these principles meaningfully in institutional practices.

Question Addressed:

What are your expectations from and suggestions to mainstream arts organizations and policy makers to embrace and promote values, processes and relations for community-based art production? What alternative strategies exist for BIPOC artists and art leaders who work within community-based values and processes?

The second group of group conversations centered on integration of social value in governance and administration of the arts. We explored the limitations of performative decolonization in mainstream arts



organizations and calls for a transformative shift toward relational accountability, ethical responsibility, and genuine inclusion of Indigenous and racialized voices in creative spaces.

1. Safe spaces and decolonization in the mainstream arts organizations

A critical question was raised about what safety truly means in practice and how policies can better support the well-being of artists and the communities they serve. Addressing this issue of safety requires a paradigm shift from performative gesture to actionable and inclusive policies that embrace the various complexities embedded in the artistic process, which include cultural, social and emotional elements. BIPOC artists and cultural leaders encounter significant pressure to conform to Western systems and protocol, which can hinder cultural practices and negatively impact the creative process. This pressure often arises from institutions that adhere to standardized practices of creating and sharing art.

“What are your expectations from and suggestions to mainstream arts organizations and policy makers to embrace and promote values, processes and relations for community-based art production? What alternative strategies exist for BIPOC artists and art leaders who work within community-based values and processes?”

1. Safe spaces and decolonization in the mainstream arts organizations
2. Gray areas of moral codes
3. Transformation and Relational Accountability

Although most organizations and institutions are aware of the need for “safe spaces,” labelling spaces as “safe” does not necessarily reflect a community's real needs and can be seen as superficial without systemic change. One of the examples shared described the challenges of securing spaces that allow ceremonial practices like smudging, which larger venues hesitate to permit due to ventilation and fire safety concerns.

Participants highlight that Indigenous and racialized artists are often invited into spaces as symbols rather than equals, leading to a dynamic where cultural presence is commodified but not genuinely engaged. This process of being reduced to a commodity is exacerbated when there is little genuine engagement in decolonial practices, and Indigenous artists are left to perform the labor of educating institutions while also trying to create their work. A speaker described this struggle as “deconstructing trust,” a process where Indigenous artists must continuously navigate the challenge of offering cultural trust while simultaneously recognizing that many of their collaborators, though well-meaning, are not yet fully invested in the transformative work needed. One speaker stated that they are not there to “do the work” of decolonization for institutions, but to tell stories and create art. The resulting tension requires holding both the urgency of storytelling and the exhaustion of structural resistance. The burden of educating, mentoring, and transforming systems should not fall disproportionately on those most marginalized by them.

Moreover, creating spaces for Indigenous, Black, and racialized artists to connect with one another is crucial. However, these spaces must move beyond general categories like “BIPOC” or “Indigenous” and instead recognize the unique experiences, histories, and cultural practices within each community. A more nuanced understanding of diversity means recognizing the particularities of each group’s lived experiences and challenges, whether they are newcomers to Canada, second-generation immigrants, or Indigenous peoples. It is also critical that these spaces are created intentionally, with the time and space necessary for artists to sit together, exchange stories, and build collective strategies for confronting barriers in the arts.

2. Gray areas of moral codes

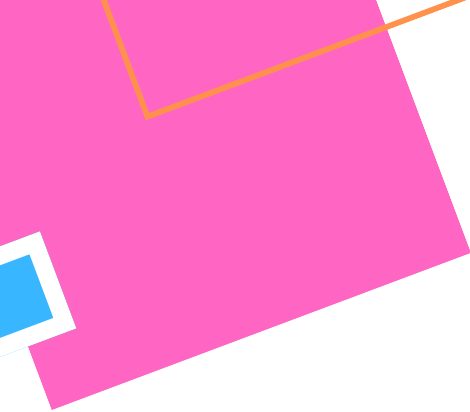
One of the participants named “gray areas” within moral and value systems as critical spaces for reflection, growth, and transformation, rather than as zones of failure or uncertainty to be avoided. These areas emerge when personal ethics, institutional policies, and relational dynamics come into tension. The notion of a “gray moral code” is the decisions and/or compromises an artist or cultural entrepreneur makes when navigating conflicting ethical situations to achieve the most equitable outcome for all partners. Ultimately, navigating one’s “gray moral code” can be interpreted as a form of care that aims to achieve a good life for oneself, community, and others. Artists navigating their personal “gray moral codes” can refer to the struggle of personal values while adapting to the

expectations and constraints of Western institutional systems.

In such instances, the concept of relational accountability, drawn from Indigenous cultural practices, becomes central. Rather than relying solely on rules, policies or punitive measures, individuals are encouraged to ask, “Who am I accountable to in this moment?” This question expands the framework of accountability beyond formal structures to include fellow artists, community members, spiritual teachings, and one’s own creative and ethical commitments.

Within these gray zones, policies can often feel rigid, prescriptive, or even punitive. Instead of defaulting to exclusion, this approach calls for a more relational and restorative path, one that recognizes the complexity of human behavior and prioritizes opportunities for learning and repair. Conflict resolution and restorative justice are proposed as necessary tools, enabling communities to engage with harm in ways that center healing, dialogue, and mutual responsibility. Ultimately, gray areas are viewed not as moral shortcomings but as inherent to the human experience—particularly within artistic and community spaces. They require a form of leadership that is deeply relational, spiritually aware, and willing to confront discomfort with care and integrity. This approach reframes moral ambiguity as a space where accountability, healing, and transformation can coexist.





3. Transforming and Relational Accountability:

Existing structures and systems are not always designed to accommodate the protocols, relationship building and maintaining processes that are key to people-centered community-arts practices. In such cases, BIPOC artists/directors strategize about how to bridge the time, space and relationships with people based on needs. “Needs” might refer to a variety of conditions that a community may be experiencing such as those who have not been represented in the arts scene, those who are underserved, those who have been looking for resources to express their creativity, or those who are impacted by a recent experience, etc.

“One speaker highlighted that relationships must be nurtured through human connection, like “sitting down for coffee or sharing personal experiences,” rather than through impersonal emails or checklists designed to satisfy institutional diversity goals”.

Another key insight emerging from these experiences is that the concept of relational accountability holds that real decolonial work is not simply about changing policies or instituting symbolic gestures, but about building deep, meaningful relationships grounded in mutual respect and understanding. These relationships cannot be built on performative actions or rushed initiatives (such as quick emails or brief meetings) but require time, sustained effort, and consistent engagement. Some artists encountered

the inadequate cultural competency of some arts organizations and a lack of understanding of the value of relationality and reciprocity in doing community-based art. In most cases, artists /directors/curators find themselves bridging the gap between their communities and the mainstream arts organizations. One speaker highlighted that relationships must be nurtured through human connection, like “sitting down for coffee or sharing personal experiences,” rather than through impersonal emails or checklists designed to satisfy institutional diversity goals.

BIPOC artists are not only expected to direct and stage an artistic work but also to compensate for the missing structures and protocols within these mainstream organizations. This is a challenging and exhausting experience that often puts Indigenous and racialized directors in the position of problem solvers where they are not given adequate resources (such as art spaces that are not ready to do the decolonization and equity work necessary). Because of this experience, many directors/artists are selective about whom they partner and work with and choose organizations that they can trust. On the other hand, many have either their own performance companies and/or partner with other racialized companies who share the same experience.

Community-based artistic work often blurs the lines between personal and professional life. This interconnectedness sometimes conflicts with policies and institutional practices that operate on an

outdated model that seeks to separate work and life, overlooking the personal investment artists bring to their craft. Family obligations, like parental responsibilities, were highlighted as an example of an artist's personal needs. This is an attempt to shape policy in environments that demand a fundamental shift in worldview, from transactional systems toward models rooted in relational accountability. This transformation is especially difficult within rigid, hierarchical structures that are deeply aligned with capitalist definitions of success. One participant reflected on this tension through her own experience at a company, where she often feels caught between her dedication to her urban Indigenous community and the institution's more traditional focus on production and performance outcomes. Another participant shares her frustrations with the slow pace of institutional change, especially in the context of community-based projects and post-COVID challenges. She reflects on how institutions often ask her to "slow down" under the guise of wanting to bring everyone along, but she questions the sincerity of that reasoning, noting that it often feels like a tactic to stall progress. The excuse of financial instability, particularly declining audiences, is commonly used to avoid implementing meaningful changes, and promises like "maybe in two years" come across as dismissive and discouraging.

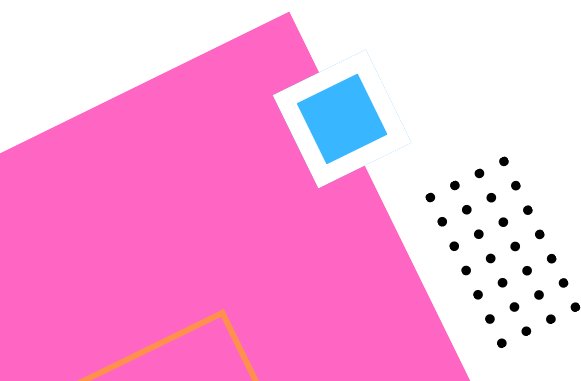
Another participant noted the importance of

"confronting the scarcity mindset" that often permeates white-dominated systems. The idea that resources are limited creates division within communities of color, fostering competition rather than collaboration. In this context, the work of decolonization becomes not only about challenging institutional power but also about dismantling narratives of limitation and scarcity that prevent communities from collaborating in ways that reflect their true cultural and artistic contributions.

4. Limitations of legalistic and policy-driven frameworks in arts organizations:

The reflections highlight a persistent tension in arts institutions between personal responsibility and institutional structures, particularly around the role of policy and legalism. Existing structures often allow individuals to hide behind the entity of "the company," or formal protocols, rather than taking personal responsibility. A recurring concern is how organizations often use policy as a shield, allowing individuals to evade personal accountability. This deflection creates environments where harm can be overlooked or minimized unless it reaches a crisis point, at which time policy is finally invoked, too often as a punitive tool rather than a proactive framework for care and responsibility.

Legalistic and policy-driven frameworks are critiqued as fundamentally reactive. Policies focus on managing misconduct after it occurs rather than as supportive frameworks that celebrate or protect those doing meaningful, values-driven work. This approach neglects the



everyday relational work required to prevent harm and fails to create spaces where mutual respect and community-centered values can thrive. Participants raise concerns about how these systems, while resistant to real change, are still the primary recipients of public funding. This creates a dilemma: even when we recognize these structures as flawed or performative, we still cannot ignore them, because they continue to wield significant influence and resources. The critical question, then, becomes how to embed new values into these legacy institutions, how to hold them accountable not just for harm done, but for the ethical responsibility they bear in serving communities with transparency and relational integrity.

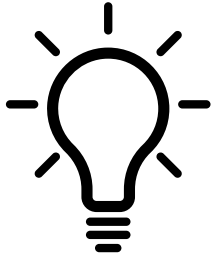
Ultimately, the reflections call for a paradigm shift: away from hierarchical, transactional systems and toward relational accountability embedded in daily practice. Policies must be reshaped to support, not hinder, ethical leadership and community care. Without this shift, institutions will continue to fall short in both protecting individuals and fulfilling their responsibilities to the communities they serve. Until institutions reevaluate their value systems and elevate relationships, trust, and community engagement to the same level as artistic output or financial targets, these deep systemic tensions will persist. This is not merely about revising a mission statement, it is about fundamentally reorienting the goals of creative work to center people, not just products.

Conclusion

Across multiple reflections shared by participants, there is a recurring theme that while institutions may gesture toward decolonization, by making space for Indigenous identities, cultural practices, or community consultation, these actions are often surface-level. True decolonial work is described as inherently disruptive, challenging the foundation of hierarchical structures and requiring those in power to relinquish control. This demand creates “discomfort”, particularly in spaces where authority is closely guarded through titles, gatekeeping, and resource control.

“This demand creates ‘discomfort’, particularly in spaces where authority is closely guarded through titles, gatekeeping, and resource control”.

There is often a resistance to invert traditional power relations, where presidents, directors, and staff sit equally in a circle, even as institutions claim to be committed to inclusion or reconciliation. Ultimately, discomfort, far from being a barrier, is framed as a doorway to justice. In this sense, transformation does not always have to look like revolution; it can be found in resilience, adaptation, and reimagining how existing structures can be redefined to support decolonial goals. Through relational accountability, discomfort, and reimagined space, real change in the arts can begin to take root. These are not easy or quick processes, but they are essential if the arts sector is to move beyond tokenistic gestures and toward a more equitable, inclusive future.



Insight Scoop: Rethinking Contracts in the Arts

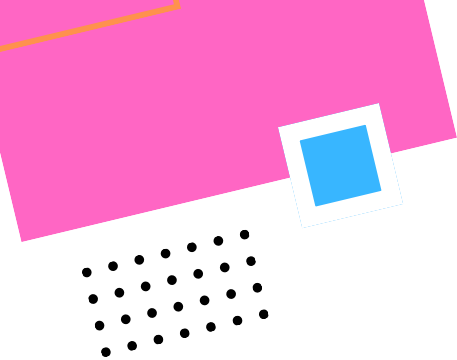
Contracts in the arts are highlighted as critical yet often overlooked tools for establishing fairness, clarity, and mutual respect between artists and institutions. Many artists, especially emerging or marginalized ones, are not taught how to navigate contracts or assert their needs, leading to confusion, misaligned expectations, and potential exploitation. Contributors emphasize the need for clearer, values-driven agreements that address not just logistics but also ethical considerations like representation, authorship, and labor boundaries.

There is a call for systemic change, where artists collectively redefine contractual norms to reflect transparency, consent, and cultural specificity. Examples include the use of riders that outline what responsibilities artists will or will not take on, especially in culturally sensitive contexts. However, these efforts are often made by individual artists and can be exhausting to sustain alone.

Contracts are also seen as a space to push back against institutional power and to ensure artists are not silently burdened with roles such as unpaid educators or cultural intermediaries. Ultimately, contributors advocate for contracts that are not just legal documents but relational tools designed to protect, empower, and align all parties through intentional, values-based negotiation from the outset.

Further Research Questions:

1. Now that the need for relational accountability, structural change, and genuine inclusion is clear, what concrete, strategic steps must we take, individually and collectively, to transform legacy systems and rebuild arts organizations rooted in equity, trust, and shared power?
2. How can legacy arts organizations restructure leadership through collective, relational governance to redistribute power, embrace diverse sources of cultural knowledge, and embed accountability in decision-making to foster meaningful transformation? What practice and policy need to be abandoned or transformed first?



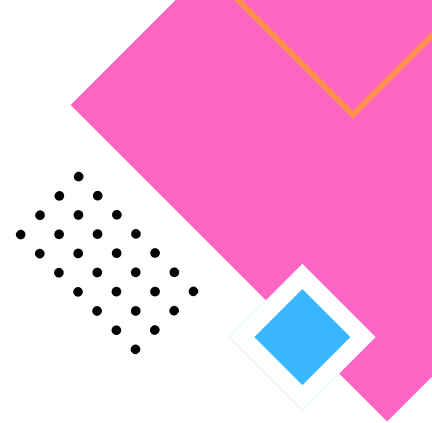
2.3 Theme 3: Cultural Policy Context, Frameworks, and Funding in the Arts

Introduction

The final set of questions aimed at understanding the experiences of BIPOC artists with arts organizations on issues such as existing funding structures, policies and processes at local, provincial and federal levels. We explored whether the arts ecosystem responds to and accommodates the values and perspectives of artists' community-based arts processes, supports their artistic growth and promotes community-building.

Many artists from equity-owed communities acknowledged that social movements since 2020 onwards have created more access to funding opportunities, and their work has positively benefited and increased. Some reflected on there being more opportunities now for BIPOC artists than before, although they thought this might be an exclusive situation as a result of the pandemic and might change. Some Indigenous artists acknowledged the presence of Indigenous funds available because of decades-long negotiations to secure them. The following points were raised in the individual meeting:

- General Understanding of Cultural Policy: Cultural policy can feel unfamiliar and abstract for some artists. Established artists with experience in boards, arts councils, decision-making, consulting, and grant applications have a more nuanced understanding of cultural policy.
- Geographic Disparities in Opportunities: Artists in urban centers and rural communities across provinces have different levels of access to funding, arts centers and education, internships and audiences.
- Calls for Change in Mainstream Arts Organizations: Some artists believe cultural policy should push mainstream arts organizations to rethink their missions, change how they work with BIPOC artists and communities, accommodate values, protocols, and practices of diverse communities. These changes could strengthen strategic decisions and policies related to equity, inclusion, diversity, access and decolonization.
- Prioritizing Specific Groups in Policy: Suggestions include prioritizing certain groups through targeted funding. This may help groups with limited access to resources. However, concerns exist that this might lead to stereotypical expectations of what "BIPOC art" should be.



- **Redistribution and Recognition of Diverse Arts Practices:** Suggestions for cultural policy improvements include relocating funds to support both established and emerging BIPOC-led organizations; incentivizing support for "non-glamorous" venues used by small companies; challenging existing policies that prioritize professional arts over community/non-professional arts. Community-based arts organizations, though limited in capacity, often have a stronger community impact than larger, mainstream institutions. They are flexible and locally rooted. They often operate with limited capacity and they can have deeper impact through empowerment, mentorship, expression of identity and community building.
- **Measuring Impact and Feedback:** Concerns were raised about how artistic impact is measured. Existing tools and lack of adequate feedback can hinder growth, especially for community-based arts.
- **Labour Relations and Broader Social Context:** Artists often turn to labour organizations (like Equity) for dispute resolution and understanding of their labour rights. This links cultural policy to broader systems such as labour relations, education, health, wellbeing. Thus, a holistic approach to policy with all its relevant extensions is required. One such example is the 35/50 initiative, a coalition of BIPOC artists across Alberta who believe in representation as an actionable plan. The 35/50 initiative started as a call for Albertan theatre institutions to commit to equitable employment of 35% Black, Indigenous, and People of Color and 50% gender-variant folx and women by 2025.

The following section delves into a focused and detailed discussion of these points, unpacking the nuances behind each theme raised in

individual meetings. It examines how artists' lived experiences intersect with cultural policy, funding structures, and institutional practices, providing a grounded understanding of where change is most urgently needed and how it might be meaningfully pursued.

Question Addressed:

Cultural policy plays a crucial role in fostering systemic change and shaping the practices and priorities of arts organizations. What changes need to happen to support BIPOC artists and their community-based work?

What changes need to happen to support BIPOC artists and their community-based work?

1. BIPOC-led spaces
2. Analysis of Funding Structures

Introduction

Cultural policy plays a pivotal role particularly in fostering systemic change to support marginalized communities. In the context of BIPOC artists and their community-based work, the existing structures often fail to provide the necessary resources and autonomy to cultivate sustainable, culturally rooted artistic practices. In this conversation with a group

of artists we focused on the challenges faced by BIPOC-led organizations, particularly in relation to funding, space, and institutional support, while exploring potential shifts in policy that can better support these organizations. By addressing the systemic barriers that limit BIPOC representation and involvement in decision-making, the conversation highlights the need for long-term investments, equitable resource distribution, and a reimagining of community engagement in the arts.

1. BIPOC-led spaces:

The housing shortage and unaffordability in major cities have created significant challenges for artists, particularly those from BIPOC communities, who often face heightened spatial insecurity and displacement. In the conversations with participants, several resources and opportunities were named. While some subsidized live-work spaces exist in neighboring areas, access within urban centers like Vancouver is extremely limited and rarely available. A few city-owned units and senior-focused housing projects offer some relief, but these resources are scarce and insufficient to meet the broader need. Many artists continue to live in precarious conditions, navigating unstable housing situations with little long-term security. Some creative interventions have attempted to address the issue, such as repurposing underused spaces like churches and office buildings for artistic use, or temporarily converting vacant motels into studios, but these are often stopgap measures rather than sustainable solutions. The ongoing lack of affordable, stable housing remains a critical barrier for artists, particularly those from historically marginalized communities.

Building upon this general housing and affordability issue, a central concern raised in the discussion is the urgent need to create and sustain BIPOC-led arts spaces that allow for autonomy, artistic growth, and community-rooted ways of working. Participants highlighted how access to space, both physical and structural, remains a critical barrier for BIPOC artists and organizations, especially in urban centers like Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal. As independent, low-barrier venues disappear due to rising property values, gentrification, and a lack of governmental support, BIPOC artists are increasingly reliant on large, historically white institutions. This reliance can stifle innovation, reinforce existing power dynamics, and limit opportunities to develop non-colonial artistic practices.



Deniz Unsal and Taiwo Afolabi presenting at Hongik University. Panel moderated by Soohye Jang, Producer/Researcher of Connected A.

Participants pointed to the disappearance of accessible venues in cities like Vancouver, emphasizing how these informal, low-risk environments were once essential for BIPOC artists to cultivate their aesthetics and processes outside the expectations of mainstream institutions. With fewer such spaces available, artists are being rushed from training directly onto main stages, often without the time or support to fully develop their work. This dynamic creates a fragile ecosystem where failure is disproportionately

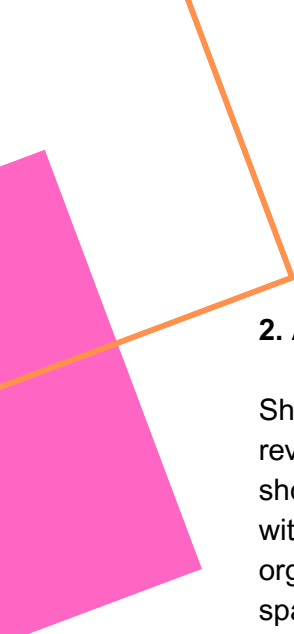
blamed on artists rather than the systems that failed to support them. Other participants echoed these concerns, expressing frustration at how BIPOC-led organizations often feel pressure to be absorbed into larger institutions rather than being empowered to grow independently. The prevailing narrative pushes artists to aim for being "picked up" by major companies, instead of nurturing sustainable, community-driven platforms of their own. The need to move away from dependency on legacy institutions and toward building fortified, adaptable structures that reflect the values and needs of the communities they serve is crucial.

On the other hand, in rural regions, while access to space may not be as urgent as in metropolitan areas, there is still a troubling shift in how development resources are distributed post-pandemic. Previously, there was strong investment in BIPOC artistic growth, but now institutions are increasingly saying, "Come back when you have a product." BIPOC artists may struggle more to negotiate for resources due to long-standing habits of gratitude and lowered expectations. This is in contrast to white artists who may more confidently advocate for support.

There is an urgency for funders and policymakers to recognize the value of these independent BIPOC-led spaces, not just as projects to support temporarily, but as foundational to the future of a more equitable arts ecosystem. Long-term investment, flexibility in development funding, and intentional efforts to return agency to BIPOC communities are key to

this shift. A major problem is that smaller art organizations are expected to deliver results comparable to larger organizations but are offered significantly fewer resources. While funding bodies strive to support the arts, they prioritize the performative aspects rather than supporting the broader goals, needs and initiatives of an organization and its artists. The conversation pointed to a deeper reimagining of how space, funding, and artistic legitimacy are distributed, with a focus on building systems where BIPOC artists are not just included, but centered and self-determined. Participants also shared their critique from within the organizations. BIPOC-led organizations are often required to do extra labor to prove their identity in order to access funding, which is a burdensome process involving numerous forms and checkboxes. Participants called for equity in the demands placed on all organizations seeking funding. They emphasized the need for continual reflection: if an organization has become disconnected from its community or no longer engages diverse audiences, then its funding shouldn't be guaranteed. Policy needs to consider demographic shifts and ensure that arts organizations evolve accordingly. As organizations grow, they often become locked into historical expectations, which can stifle artistic freedom, especially for BIPOC artists.

"BIPOC-led organizations are often required to do extra labor to prove their identity in order to access funding, which is a burdensome process involving numerous forms and checkboxes".



2. Analysis of Funding Structures

Shifting dynamics in the arts sector, particularly in relation to funding and project leadership, reveal both progress and persistent inequities. Recent developments in granting practices have shown promise, as funding bodies increasingly require mainstream institutions to collaborate with and support community-led initiatives. This shift pressures larger, traditionally white-led organizations to relinquish control and move beyond tokenistic approaches, thereby creating space for BIPOC and community organizations to lead. While this represents a step forward, the majority of funding continues to be allocated to white-led institutions, highlighting

enduring structural imbalances. Although these organizations often adapt to new funding criteria to maintain operations, the core issue remains the inequitable distribution of financial resources. To address this, there is a critical need for grant structures that explicitly prioritize community organizations as principal partners, fostering genuine relationship-building and trust. Ultimately, financial leverage appears to be the primary catalyst for meaningful transformation in the arts landscape, even if such change is driven more by necessity than by a collective commitment to equity.

There is an appreciation for initiatives like the British Columbia Arts Council's *Accelerator Grant*, which provided low-barrier funding to collectives and groups not formally incorporated as nonprofits. This expanded access helped artists who didn't want to adopt traditional structures (like boards or charitable status), and instead allowed them to work in ways that made the most sense for their communities. This initiative is a step toward increasing the diversity of artistic work and bringing new knowledge into the sector. The Accelerator Grant was helpful for removing institutional barriers and allowing collectives and individuals to access multi-year, operations-style funding. Participants appreciated how the BC Arts Council clearly prioritized underrepresented groups, such as Indigenous, BIPOC, and rural artists, and provided transparent expectations. Funding bodies must be proactive rather than passive, suggesting they should seek out and learn from grassroots organizations already innovating and leading change.

On the other hand, in programs like the Canada Council for the Arts' Composite Grant, larger, legacy organizations with more administrative capacity are able to access project funding intended for emerging groups, effectively crowding out newer, often racialized artists. Participants advocated for policy shifts that would allow newer, high-performing companies to "leapfrog" over legacy groups when warranted, rather than being held back by hierarchical norms rooted in colonial values like "paying your dues." Some operating companies have shifted into Composite because it offers more money through project-based funding, unintentionally creating a competitive disadvantage for smaller or equity-seeking companies. What was meant to be a transitional program has instead become a route for well-resourced institutions to access more funds, thus undermining its original purpose.

In terms of recommendations to disrupt this entrenched legacy funding structure one participant suggested a model that she implemented in a previous initiative where every organization received a mandatory 10% cut, and the reclaimed funds were redistributed, essentially creating space for new

organizations without increasing the overall budget. Another participant shared that BC Arts Council reduced funding for the highest-earning companies and reallocated that money to deserving and under-resourced groups. Participants supported a redistribution strategy rooted in equity, while also emphasizing the need to abandon the outdated belief that artists must follow a linear, hierarchical path to receive support. Instead, funding should reflect the actual impact and relevance of a company's work, not just its history.

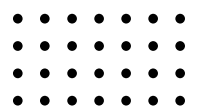
There is a need for policy-supported transitional funding in the arts sector, particularly for independent organizations where leadership roles are often highly centralized. Such funding could support intentional knowledge transfer between outgoing and incoming leaders, ensuring continuity and reducing burnout. This approach is especially relevant during moments of organizational transition, such as parental leave or leadership change, where gaps in infrastructure can leave teams vulnerable.

"There is a need for policy-supported transitional funding in the arts sector, particularly for independent organizations where leadership roles are often highly centralized".

Concerns have been raised about the bureaucratic nature of arts funding bodies such as the Canada Council for the Arts, particularly around limited communication and feedback. In contrast, some have found Canadian Heritage to be more accessible, citing consistent personal contact and simplified application processes. There is a call for arts councils to be more transparent, engaged, and responsive to the communities they support.

Additionally, participants suggested to meaningfully integrate arts organizations into city-wide cultural planning. Integrating the arts into city policy and economic planning is not only a cultural imperative but also a strategic one. Examples from cities like New York demonstrate how embedding the arts into civic identity can foster broader public engagement and cultural value. When key cultural stakeholders, especially those representing small and independent companies, are excluded from planning processes, the resulting policies often fail to address the realities of those working on the ground. The current "pay-to-play" structure of many arts associations further disadvantages smaller organizations that prioritize paying artists over membership dues, limiting their participation in critical sector-wide conversations. For city-wide cultural strategies to be truly effective and equitable, they must actively consult and include a diverse range of arts organizations, ensuring their insights and needs are reflected in policy and infrastructure decisions.

The fragility of arts funding further underscores the need for continuous reflection and accountability within organizations. When a company's work becomes disconnected from its community or drifts away from principles of equity and representation, this disconnection should have tangible consequences in funding allocation. Such an approach encourages institutions to remain responsive to evolving societal values and ensures that financial



support aligns with a commitment to inclusive, community-engaged practices. This model promotes a funding ecosystem where adaptability and social relevance are prioritized, reinforcing the broader goal of structural transformation in the arts sector.

Exploring possibilities of private funding, participants pointed out that access to private foundation funding often requires charitable status, creating further barriers. To navigate this barrier, some organizations act as proxies to help others access funding before gaining their own charity status.

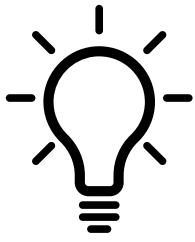
Finally, participants advocated for universal basic income for artists.

Conclusion

In conclusion, supporting BIPOC artists and their community-based work requires a fundamental restructuring of cultural policy and funding frameworks to prioritize equity, sustainability, and self-determination. The current landscape, shaped by historic inequities and entrenched power structures, continues to place disproportionate burdens on BIPOC-led organizations, expecting them to carry out essential community engagement with minimal support and recognition. A critical shift must occur, from temporary project-based support to long-term, operational investment in BIPOC-led spaces that foster cultural autonomy and innovation. This includes addressing spatial inequities in both urban and rural contexts, ensuring transitional leadership support, and reimagining funding models that emphasize actual impact over institutional legacy. Granting bodies must adopt more transparent, accessible, and flexible approaches, and integrate BIPOC voices meaningfully into cultural planning and policymaking. Equitable redistribution of funds, including proactive measures such as percentage-based reallocation can open space for emerging, community-rooted organizations to thrive. Furthermore, distinguishing between community-based and community-driven practices highlights the need to center communities not merely as audiences or subjects, but as co-creators and decision-makers. Ultimately, cultural policy must be reoriented to recognize and resource the full spectrum of BIPOC artistic contributions, not as peripheral to the arts ecosystem, but as vital to its future.

Further research questions:

1. What types of long-term infrastructure investments are needed to help BIPOC-led arts organizations remain sustainable and autonomous in urban and rural areas facing rising costs and displacement?
2. How can urban cultural planning support fair and lasting partnerships between BIPOC-led arts organizations and city institutions to improve access to space, resources, and decision-making?
3. What specific accountability measures can be introduced into cultural funding frameworks to ensure that large, legacy institutions meaningfully share resources and power with BIPOC-led and community-driven organizations?



Insight Scoop: Community engagement by BIPOC organizations

BIPOC-led organizations occupy a critical yet often undervalued position in the arts sector, where they are frequently expected to shoulder the labor of community engagement without receiving equitable resources or institutional support. A persistent assumption within the arts ecosystem is that racialized organizations will naturally attract diverse audiences by virtue of their identity; however, this overlooks the deliberate, resource-intensive process of building trust and relationships within communities. These organizations are not only creating art but also doing the difficult cultural work of outreach, education, and engagement—functions that are vital for fostering inclusive participation in the arts but that are rarely funded adequately. Larger, predominantly white institutions often benefit from these efforts, especially in collaborative projects where the visibility and cultural capital accrued flow upwards, while the labor and risk remain with the smaller, BIPOC-led partners. This imbalance raises urgent questions about accountability, sustainability, and structural fairness.

A useful conceptual distinction emerges in this context between community-based work and community-driven practice. Community-based work refers to artistic programming situated within or about a community, often led by professional artists who are external to that community. While it may be well-intentioned, it can reproduce hierarchical dynamics if it lacks genuine collaboration. In contrast, community-driven practice centers the community as the primary agent of the creative process, emphasizing relationship-building, mutual learning, and collective authorship. This model prioritizes process over product and seeks to enrich rather than simply represent or extract from the community. Supporting this form of practice requires not just funding individual projects, but investing in the long-term capacity of BIPOC organizations and communities to lead and sustain their own cultural expressions.

To ensure equity in partnerships, formal mechanisms such as template contracts and clear working agreements are needed. These can help define roles, responsibilities, and benefits in collaborations between large institutions and smaller BIPOC organizations, fostering transparency and shared accountability. Moreover, arts service organizations have a pivotal role to play in supporting this infrastructure by offering structural resources, advocacy, and tools for sustainable practice. Finally, authentic audience engagement must move beyond simplistic programming strategies to involve ongoing consultation with communities. Only through such intentional and collaborative approaches can the arts sector begin to dismantle extractive practices and move toward a more equitable, community-driven future.

“BIPOC-led organizations occupy a critical yet often undervalued position in the arts sector, where they are frequently expected to shoulder the labor of community engagement without receiving equitable resources or institutional support”.

Section Three:

Conclusion

Reimagining Policy-Making in the Arts from a Care Ethics Perspective?

What if cultural policy and its operations by art councils and cultural agencies were grounded in care, and the socio-cultural values of the art? Artists navigate tensions between caring for community collaborators and meeting institutional expectations. Through their stories, we explore how reciprocity, interdependence, and relationality can reshape cultural policy. Perspectives shared by Indigenous and racialized artists underscore the significance of relationality and reciprocity in the realm of arts production. They emphasize the centrality of establishing and nurturing relationships, building trust, cultivating respect, and responding to the needs of all those involved in the artistic process. This emphasis on relational dynamics challenges the conventional parameters upon which cultural policies have traditionally been predicated. The call for cultural policies that prioritize relational accountability, responsiveness, and reciprocity represents a paradigm shift, a fundamental reorientation of the underlying values that govern the cultural landscape. It demands a departure from the prevailing norms and a recognition that the arts are not merely a product or commodity, but rather a breathing ecosystem of interconnected relationships and shared experiences. This is the perspective adopted by the ethics of care as well (Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Robinson 2015). Engster and Hamington (2015) identify themes such as interdependence between people, responsiveness to the other, understanding the particularities of other's experience, crossing moral boundaries, and empathy and learning from emotions significant for this theory.



Deniz Unsal and Taiwo Afolabi presenting their research at the Socially Engaged Musicians' Network's Open Forum in Seoul, May 2025

“Robinson defines ethics of care as ‘a moral disposition and set of practices that revolve around an understanding of the self as constituted by relations with others...[that] seeks solutions to problems related to the giving and receiving of care that are non-exploitative and equitable’”
(Webteam, 2014).

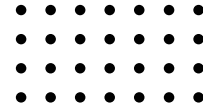
Robinson defines ethics of care as “a moral disposition and set of practices that revolve around an understanding of the self as constituted by relations with others...[that] seeks solutions to problems related to the giving and receiving of care that are non-exploitative and equitable” (Webteam, 2014). Elsewhere, Robinson (2015), providing a dissenting perspective within feminism where ethics of care was born, raises the point that in spite of a language of individual empowerment in feminism, ethics of care centers on human interdependence and vulnerability (p.295). In the context of the arts, it invites for “rethinking the very process whereby value is attributed” to the arts (Millner & Coombs, 2022). Campbell elaborates on “communities of care” as that which demonstrates “a shift towards a collective impulse and suggests the resilience of alternative formations of social enterprise within the broader neoliberal uptake of the creative industries as economic driver” (Campbell, 2021). This approach informs our position in this research as researchers and our approach to knowledge creation and dissemination. This paradigm shift to relationality invites us to embrace a different set of guiding principles. Care ethics presents us with a conceptual framework and a set of tools to critically reflect on cultural policy through a lens of empathy and mutual responsibility. It challenges us to move beyond transactional frameworks and instead promote and foster the ability to engender connection, understanding, and collective growth at personal and institutional levels.

Belfiore (2022) calls for moving beyond a theoretical cultural analysis to a “social justice—driven, activist cultural policy agenda that brings together cultural policy researchers, artists, and creative sector professionals” (75). This agenda would put pressure on funding agencies to adopt a ‘social connection model’ of responsibility to improve funding infrastructure and expose exploitative systems (Belfiore 2022, 75). By centering relational accountability, responsiveness, and reciprocity, cultural policies can become catalysts for transformative change, fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and vibrant artistic ecosystem. This paradigm shift invites us to reimagine the role of cultural policy as a facilitator of meaningful relationships, a catalyst for empowerment, diversity of cultural expressions and visibility.



Panelists from a community gathering at the Belfry Theatre in Victoria, British Columbia. Taiwo Afolabi, Kenji Maeda, Jasmindra Jawanda, Rebecca Hass, and Deniz Ünsal

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APPENDIX

REFLECTION CHECKLIST

The following reflection questions and guiding value suggestions are offered as a starting point for institutions, leaders, policymakers, policy researchers, arts managers, etc. across the arts sector. The questions aim to foster critical self-inquiry, ethical decision-making, and transformative practice in how to engage with BIPOC leadership, artistry, and with community-driven cultural work. Rooted in an ethics of care and grounded in decolonial and anti-oppressive principles, the questions encourage arts organizations and policy-makers to examine their roles in dismantling systemic barriers. The accompanying guiding values offer a compass for reimagining power, fostering collaboration, and building sustainable and inclusive futures in the arts that go beyond tokenistic representation toward meaningful structural change.

LEGACY ART INSTITUTIONS:

Questions for Reflection:

1. How do our current missions and values reflect (or fail to reflect) the cultural protocols, practices, and holistic needs of the BIPOC communities we work with and claim to serve?
2. How are we actively relinquishing institutional control to allow for collective, community-driven decision-making in programming and leadership?
3. Are our inclusion efforts dismantling hierarchical and gatekeeping structures, or are they reinforcing them under new language?
4. In what ways do we create environments where BIPOC artists and leaders can make mistakes, grow, and thrive without fear of surveillance or reprisal?
5. What are the practical steps that Canadian arts education institutions can take to create more equitable pathways for BIPOC students to access leadership roles in arts administration and policy-making?

Guiding Values:

- Relationality and shared responsibility
- Decolonization
- Cultural safety
- Structural transformation
- Transparency and accountability

POLICY- MAKERS (FUNDING BODIES & CULTURAL PLANNERS):

Questions for Reflection:

1. Are our funding frameworks shifting from project-based to long-term, sustainable investments in BIPOC-led spaces and leadership?
2. How are we ensuring that resource distribution aligns with the distinct cultural and contextual needs of different BIPOC communities?
3. How do our policies differentiate between community-based and community-driven initiatives and are we resourcing the latter as vital cultural infrastructure?
4. What structural mechanisms are in place to ensure that BIPOC voices are not only consulted, but have shared authority in shaping cultural policy?
5. How can we design funding conditions, evaluation criteria, or strategic incentives that require arts organizations to critically assess and revise their internal policies, cultures, and governance in relation to equity, cultural safety, and relational accountability?

Guiding Values:

- Long-term equity
- Relationality: participatory policymaking
- Decolonization
- Transformation

APPENDIX

REFLECTION CHECKLIST

RESEARCHERS OF ARTS LEADERSHIP AND POLICY:

Questions for Reflection:

1. How do intergenerational, intersectoral and interpersonal knowledge transmission practices within BIPOC arts communities contribute to leadership development, and what role do mentors play in shaping the next generation of BIPOC arts leaders?
2. What are the ways in which BIPOC arts leaders build supportive, care-based leadership networks that provide both practical guidance and emotional resilience, and how do these networks build archives and memory for all, but especially for those who are in remote arts environments?
3. What structural shifts are required within arts organizations to move from hierarchical, legacy-driven models toward relational, care-based approaches that are responsive to BIPOC communities and leadership?
4. How do intersectional factors (e.g., race, gender, class, culture) shape the leadership experiences of BIPOC artists within mainstream arts organizations, and how can arts organizations create more inclusive leadership pathways that account for these multiple dimensions of identity?
5. How can the ethics of care be operationalized in leadership development, organizational culture, and funding structures to sustain BIPOC-led initiatives and reduce burnout, isolation, and precarity?

Guiding Values:

- Relationality
- Reciprocity
- Transparency
- Accountability

The following checklist for BIPOC artists and emerging arts leaders are offered with the ultimate goal of empowering them to critically evaluate their values, practices, and relationships within the arts ecosystem. Unlike the questions posed to arts institutions and policymakers, which focus on structural changes and accountability, these questions aim to help artists and leaders from BIPOC communities reflect on their unique experiences of navigating power dynamics, resilience in the face of challenges, and the emotional and ethical toll of working within often exclusionary spaces. The intention is to encourage a deeper exploration of their practices and experiences, fostering collaboration and the formation of alliances with other BIPOC artists, organizations, and like-minded mainstream institutions that have integrated decolonization into their core values. By strengthening these connections, BIPOC artists and arts leaders can amplify their collective impact, create more supportive networks, and drive long-term, transformative change in the arts sector.

APPENDIX

REFLECTION CHECKLIST

BIPOC ART LEADERS

Questions for Reflection:

1. What does inclusive leadership mean to me, and how can I foster it within the organizations I work with? Where do I see potential for growth, and how can I ensure that the voices of BIPOC artists are amplified and respected in the leadership decisions I make?
2. What gaps do I see in my leadership education and training, and how can I proactively seek out resources, mentors, or programs that will equip me with the tools needed to lead in a way that is both culturally relevant and transformative?
3. In what ways am I challenging the existing power structures in my field? How can I be more strategic in forming alliances with other leaders or organizations to dismantle systemic barriers, and how do I ensure that my efforts are aligned with long-term, sustainable change?

Guiding Values:

- Guiding values:
- Relationality
- Reciprocity
- Transformation
- Accountability

BIPOC ARTISTS

Questions for Reflection:

1. In what ways am I currently being supported by arts organizations and where do I feel my specific needs as a BIPOC artist are overlooked? What resources, programs, or relationships could strengthen my practice moving forward?
2. What alliances or collaborations have I built with other BIPOC artists, and how can I expand these relationships to create a more supportive, collective space for innovation and advocacy in the arts? What role do I play in maintaining these alliances?
3. How can I deepen my engagement with mentorship, and what types of mentors or support networks would help me feel seen, heard, and empowered in my artistic journey? What do I need to seek out or cultivate to ensure this mentorship is meaningful?

Guiding Values:

- Relationality
- Reciprocity
- Cultural Safety